

NSW Grain Belt Community Survey 2005

Evaluating the community's understanding about
the NSW Rural Fire Service

Report 1
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A report to the NSW Rural Fire Service
by

The Bushfire CRC Project D3 at La Trobe University
Enhancing the Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Fire-fighters

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Preamble

This is the final version of the first report from the NSW Grain Belt Community Survey. The report was initially released as an exposure draft in November 2005. The authors wish to thank those who provided comments and feedback and take pleasure in releasing this final draft. The survey captured a generous sample across a wide area of NSW using a large questionnaire and has resulted in a rich and comprehensive data base of factors affecting the recruitment and retention of rural volunteers by the Rural Fire Service. This will be the first of several reports to be written as analysis of the data base continues.

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The cover photograph and the map of RFS Region boundaries supplied courtesy of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Executive Summary

(A note of explanation, throughout this Report, the authors refer to possible actions to be taken by “RFS”. What we mean by this short-hand is an appropriate combination of RFS senior management, Regional managers and Brigade leaders.)

Volunteer fire brigades in Australia have experienced a trend of declining membership over the past 30 years. The problem is not isolated to Australia but common to other industrialised democracies around the world.

The object of this study is to provide the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) with information about the communities it protects and from which it recruits volunteers. The study is designed to investigate the knowledge and understanding members of rural communities have about RFS. Further it is designed to identify factors that encourage or discourage individuals from volunteering with RFS in order to improve the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire-fighters in the future.

The study was undertaken in mid-2005 in RFS Region West. It was a collaborative endeavour, involving RFS Region West, RFS Volunteer Relations, and the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project Team. Twenty nine communities throughout central and western New South Wales were surveyed using self-administered questionnaires. All households serviced by the local post office in each community (10,791) were sent a package containing two self-administered questionnaires. These were to be completed by persons aged 18 years and older who were *not* current members of RFS. 1,188 completed questionnaires were returned and processed for analysis.

The survey used a large questionnaire that has resulted in a comprehensive data base which will, over time, allow a detailed analysis of the community’s relationship with RFS.

This first report explores community members’ interest in, and likelihood of, volunteering with RFS. It analyses the factors that encourage or discourage volunteering.

Interest in and likelihood of volunteering

- About 20% of respondents expressed *interest* in volunteering with RFS in a **fire-fighting** role whilst about 40% of respondents expressed *interest* in volunteering in a specialist, **non fire-fighting** role;
- Only about one third of those *interested* in either role thought it *likely* that they would volunteer to join RFS within the next 12 months;
- Of those *likely* to volunteer for a fire-fighting role, about 65% were male and 35% were female;
- Of those *likely* to volunteer for a *non* fire-fighting role, about 40% were male and 60% were female;
- The availability of people *likely* to volunteer for fire-fighting roles is highest amongst younger respondents and declines with age;
- The availability of people *likely* to volunteer for non fire-fighting roles remains level across all age groups;

- For both **fire-fighting** and **non fire-fighting** roles, there are significant fluctuations in the availability of people to volunteer and these seem to be related to lifecycle stages. In particular, the availability of people *interested* or *likely* to volunteer falls between the ages of 35 and 45.

What would make it easier to volunteer?

- Approximately 60% of respondents thought that information sessions about volunteering with RFS would be helpful to them, and similar proportions thought that publicising specific intake dates would be useful;
- About 55% thought that it would be helpful if they could gain skills or qualifications in conjunction with RFS activities that they could use in other aspects of life;
- About 50% felt it would be valuable if there was an orientation process to help new recruits get to know other brigade members and discover how the brigade works;
- About 30% thought it was important for brigades be more open to involving family and friends, and to assist in some way with child-care during RFS activities.

What are the major barriers to volunteering with RFS?

- About 50% of respondents reported that they did not have time, or had other commitments and priorities;
- About 40% of respondents were reluctant to join RFS as an organised fire service, preferring instead to focus on protecting a closer circle of family, friends and neighbours;
- About 35% of respondents thought they were unsuitable to volunteer with RFS due to age, illness, disability, family commitments or their own emotional vulnerability;
- About 35% of respondents feared injury and possible resultant loss of income;
- About 30% of respondents reported that they did not know that more volunteers were needed, or did not know how to apply to volunteer;
- About 30% expressed a fear of being sued as a result of activities with RFS;
- About 30% feared that RFS activities would be too distressing or frightening;
- About 25% of respondents thought their employer would not be happy about them attending fires with RFS;
- About 25% of respondents reported that they did not have anyone to mind their children.

General Conclusions

A significant proportion of the community are interested in volunteering with RFS but only about one third of those think they are *likely* to do so. The fact that twice as many respondents expressed interest in specialist, *non* fire-fighting roles than in fire-fighting roles offers the possibility that recruitment efforts emphasising the specialist roles may be more successful at initially attracting people to the Service. It may well be that people with no direct experience of RFS have unwarranted concerns about the demands of the fire-fighting role and they may find that they can, in fact, undertake this role once they have had exposure to their brigade.

The barriers that prevent people from volunteering fall into several major categories. Some, such as old age, illness or disability are intractable. However, some people affected by these barriers are able to volunteer in *non* fire-fighting roles. RFS and brigades could utilise this valuable human resource in non-operational areas such as community education and preparedness planning, and so include members of the community who may not be available for active fire-fighting.

The greatest single barrier reported by respondents is their lack of time, and in particular the unpredictable nature of their time commitments. RFS, through Regions and brigades, may wish to look closely at the demands placed on volunteers' time and strive to ensure that these remain reasonable, and flexible. It will also be important for RFS to ensure that this reasonableness and flexibility are well publicised in the broader community.

For some respondents, a reported lack of time will be absolute, for others it will be relative to competing priorities. In order for people to make volunteering with RFS a higher priority it is important that they understand and support the rationale for having a fire service organised in the form of RFS. The data indicate that a large proportion of the population do not understand, or at least do not support such a rationale. Many respondents reported that "if there's a big enough fire I'll be there anyway, so I do not need to join the RFS". A similar proportion reported "My first priority is to protect my own property and my neighbours/family/friends properties. I cannot do that if I'm off somewhere else with RFS". Others felt that RFS had become "too bureaucratic". RFS may benefit from more effectively explaining the rationale for being an organised, community-based, but centrally coordinated fire service.

Another major category of barriers could be termed "fears, anxieties and caution". 30-40% of respondents reported fears such as concern for their safety, fear of injury and resultant loss of income, worries about being sued, and anxiety that they would find it too distressing. RFS already addresses many of these concerns by, for example, emphasising a culture of safety, facilitating worker's compensation cover and organising critical incident stress support. The Service will benefit from (a) ensuring that these provisions are adequate, and (b) publicising them appropriately in its recruitment initiatives. The community's perceptions of the risks associated with being involved in a fire service are no doubt heavily influenced by dramatic accounts in the news and entertainment media. RFS may benefit from countering the more sensational aspects of these representations.

The analyses strongly suggest that lifecycle factors such as family and career obligations lead to a significant lowering of people's availability for volunteering with RFS from the ages of about 35 to 45. Whilst this finding requires further analysis, RFS may benefit from ensuring that volunteers lost to it during this lifecycle phase are not lost permanently but encouraged to return as the phase passes. Volunteer fire agencies have traditionally been concerned about volunteers who are registered but become inactive for a time. RFS might consider devising a more sophisticated approach to retaining contact with members who become inactive due to transitory, lifecycle-based factors, rather than simply de-registering them.

Respondents reported that more information is central to being interested in volunteering: more information about what is involved and why they are needed. It is

apparent from the data on barriers that RFS would benefit from better explaining the rationale for its existence, the range of activities in which it is involved, and the operational methods it employs.

Many respondents also supported the suggestion of well-publicised intake dates for recruitment.

Respondents also wanted RFS volunteering to be of more mutual benefit to them. For example they wanted to acquire skills and qualifications, such as first aid certification, through their RFS volunteering that would be helpful in other parts of their lives. They also wanted RFS to be open to the involvement of family and friends, and supportive of family-related needs such as child care.

Main Messages

There is a very limited pool of potential operational role volunteers across the Region. There is a body of generalised good will in the community toward rural fire brigades and their volunteers. There is a significant negative perception in the community of RFS and volunteering with RFS. There is widespread ignorance in the community of the support RFS provides for its volunteers. For the authors, these are compelling reasons for RFS senior management to give consideration to commissioning a community education and marketing campaign to counter the negative perceptions, and ignorance of, RFS in sections of the Regional community.

Our data show there are significant levels of lack of knowledge or understanding of:

1. the level and variety of hazards the community is exposed to (that RFS is intended to address);
2. the resulting need for people to address those hazards;
3. the role played by RFS to address those hazards;
4. the fact that RFS is voluntary;
5. the economic need for RFS to be largely voluntary;
6. the need for people in small communities to give priority to volunteering with RFS over other competing leisure activities;
7. what RFS volunteers actually do;
8. how RFS is organised and resourced;
9. what is involved in training, accreditation, turnouts, meetings, hazard reduction burns etc.;
10. how RFS supports its volunteers;
11. what risks might be involved for RFS volunteers and their dependents;
12. how RFS mitigates those risks to support its volunteers.

We understand from various anecdotal sources that there are strains among the various classes of stakeholders in the world of rural fire fighting:

- between volunteers and management over volunteer autonomy, the rigidity of organisational practices and resource allocation;
- between RFS and non-RFS members of the community, particularly farmers, over the need for formal organisation, community-wide benefit, avoidance of risk (including political risk) versus “getting the job done and getting back to work”, and serving the interests of self and a closer circle of family and friends;
- among conservationists, government and landholders over the management of crown land, particularly with reference to fire management;

Based on anecdotal accounts, media reports and feedback to the authors, elements of the volunteer membership in the Region appears to be moderately to severely cynical about RFS management. For example, some volunteers were critical of the undertaking of the Grain Belt Survey arguing “Everyone who can be, is already in the RFS; there’s nobody else”, and expressing concerns about the possible cost of the survey. Others have formed a break away volunteers’ association claiming that the RFSA is too closely aligned to RFS management.

So there is a need to; (a) overcome the ignorance problem (that is, to explain items 1 to 12 above to the community) but (b), avoid a glossy or costly looking advertising campaign that further alienates elements of the current volunteer membership in the Region.

This report has identified several broad areas of action for RFS to consider for improving the recruitment and retention of volunteers from rural communities. Further specific recommendations will emerge as analysis of the data continues.

Background

The Bushfire CRC Project D3, *Enhancing the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire-fighters* was established in January 2004 to assist fire agencies with research into issues affecting the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire-fighters.

In October 2004, the NSW Rural Fire Service's (RFS) Department of Volunteer Relations, and Region West senior management commissioned the Bushfire CRC Project D3 team to conduct a survey of communities in RFS Region West.

The survey was to investigate:

- The knowledge and understanding in the community about RFS and local brigades;
- Community views about RFS and local brigades;
- Factors that discourage or prevent community members from volunteering with RFS.

The survey was organised through RFS Region West headquarters in Young. Region management was invited to select communities in Region West where there were problems with volunteer recruitment or retention in the local brigades. Region West management, in consultation with Zone managers, initially identified 13 communities for the survey. During the course of the study an additional 16 communities were surveyed so as to (a) give a comprehensive coverage of the Region, and (b) boost the number of respondents.

A questionnaire was designed by the Bushfire CRC in close consultation with RFS Volunteer Relations Department and Region West Management. A copy of the questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix B.

This report focuses on identifying ways of increasing the recruitment of new RFS volunteers. As such, the respondents of most interest are those members of the community who have not volunteered with RFS either now or in the past. In this report, unless otherwise stated, all analyses exclude the 148 respondents (12%) who are either present or past volunteers with RFS, giving a net sample size of 1,046. Subsequent reports will analyse data from those respondents who were current or former members of RFS at the time of the survey.

The survey covered 29 small to medium rural communities throughout Region West. The population of the surveyed communities aged 18 and over, is approximately 20,000 people (ABS, Census 2001). Based on data supplied by RFS Region West Headquarters, there are approximately 2,500 current members in brigades in the survey area. From this it is estimated that current RFS volunteers make up about 12.5% of the adult population in the surveyed area. Typically about 85% of the membership of brigades is male, suggesting that approximately 21% of the adult male population in the survey area are currently registered members of RFS. Current members of RFS were asked not to complete questionnaires and the affect of this is apparent in the data. The sample data show significantly fewer males than females in age groups below about the age of 50.

The survey data can tell us two separate things about this population. It can tell us how inclined people are towards volunteering with RFS, and it can tell us the relative numbers of people in different demographic categories that are available to volunteer with RFS. For example, younger males may be more motivated to volunteer with RFS than older males, but since many of them are already members; those males remaining in the community who are *available* to volunteer may be predominantly older.

For most of this report the focus will be on these two factors: motivation and relative numbers in the population who are not already members. The combination of these factors is referred to as *availability*.

Interest in and likelihood of volunteering with RFS

A key objective of the survey was to estimate the number of untapped potential volunteer recruits available in the community. Whilst theoretically any able-bodied person of good character between 18 and about 60 is a potential recruit, in reality only a fraction of those will be interested in volunteering with a fire agency. For a variety of practical reasons only some of those will actually be able to volunteer.

Respondents were asked how *interested* they were in volunteering with RFS, either as a fire-fighter or in a specialist, *non* fire-fighting role. They were also asked to estimate how *likely* it was that they would actually volunteer with RFS during the next 12 months, again either in a fire-fighting role or a specialist, *non* fire-fighting role.

Questions were framed on five point Likert scales with the following options:

1. Not at all interested;
2. Not very interested;
3. Uncertain;
4. Somewhat interested; and
5. Very interested.

1. Very unlikely;
2. Somewhat unlikely;
3. Don't know;
4. Somewhat likely; and
5. Very likely.

For the sake of simplicity the report focuses on respondents who reported being “Somewhat interested” or “Very interested” and combines those as “Interested”. Similarly, respondents who report being “Somewhat likely” or “Very likely” to join during the next 12 months are reported here as simply “Likely” to join.

21% of respondents reported that they were “Interested” in volunteering with RFS as fire-fighters and 39% were “Interested” in volunteering in a specialist, *non* fire-fighting role. However, for both roles, only about one third of those who expressed “Interest” thought it was “Likely” that they would volunteer within the next 12 months.

	Count	Percent
Somewhat or very interested in volunteering with RFS in a fire-fighting role	181	21%
Somewhat or very Interested in volunteering with RFS in a specialist role	337	39%
Somewhat or very likely to volunteer with RFS in a fire-fighting role in the next 12 months	71	8%
Somewhat or very likely to volunteer with RFS in a specialist role in the next 12 months	109	13%

Table 1 Interest in and likelihood of volunteering with RFS reported by respondents who have never been members of RFS.

The impact of gender

Interest in volunteering

Further analysis was conducted to determine levels of interest, and the likelihood of volunteering, along gender lines.

Table 2 below shows that there are about 25% more males *available* who are interested in fire-fighting roles than females, but that there are twice as many females *available* who are interested in specialist, non fire-fighting roles than males. Notably, nearly three times as many females expressed interest in non fire-fighting roles compared with fire-fighting roles.

Likelihood of volunteering

Nearly twice as many males were *available* who thought they were “Likely” to actually volunteer for fire-fighting roles (45) compared with females (26). This is despite the relatively fewer numbers of males in the sample. The number of males who thought they were “Likely” to volunteer with RFS as fire-fighters (45) was about 45% of the number that were “Interested” (101). The number of males who thought they were “Likely” to join RFS in non fire-fighting roles (44) was about 38% of the number who were “Interested” (117). Another interesting finding was that males thought they were equally “Likely” to volunteer in a non fire-fighting role (45) as in a fire-fighting role (44).

About 30% of the females who were “Interested” in volunteering with RFS, in either role (80 & 220), thought that they were actually “Likely” to do so (26 & 65). Compared with males, females seem to perceive greater barriers in translating “Interest” to a “Likelihood” of joining. It may be constructive to devote further analysis to the barriers perceived by women, particularly in relation to the non fire-fighting role.

There were 50% fewer females (26) than males (45) who thought it likely that they would volunteer as fire-fighters, but 50% more females (65) than males (44) available who thought it likely that they would volunteer for a non-fire-fighter role.

	Male Count (%)	Female Count (%)
Interested in volunteering with RFS in a fire-fighting role	101 (56%)	80 (44%)
Interested in volunteering with RFS in a non fire-fighting role	117 (35%)	220 (65%)
Likely to volunteer with RFS in a fire-fighting role in the next 12 months	45 (63%)	26 (37%)
Likely to volunteer with RFS in a non fire-fighting role in the next 12 months	44 (40%)	65 (60%)

Table 2. Interest in, and likelihood of joining broken down by sex. (row percentages)

The impact of age

The graph in Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents within each 5-year age group who expressed “Interest” in volunteering with RFS in a fire-fighter role. Note that this and the subsequent three graphs do not take into account the population distribution and thus do not show *availability*. Analysis of *availability* follows commencing on page 10.

The level of “Interest” in fire-fighting roles declines with age from around 25% of the population showing “Interest” in their 20’s to around 10% in their early 70’s. “Interest” peaks for respondents around the age of 30, and again for respondents around the age of 55. “Interest” is lower for respondents in their early 20’s and around the age of 40. Caution needs to be exercised in relation to these fluctuations as the absolute numbers of respondents in each 5-year age group are not high. However, it does appear that the lifecycle factors such as parenting and career factors are important in limiting the level of “Interest” in volunteering for people between the ages of about 35 and 45.

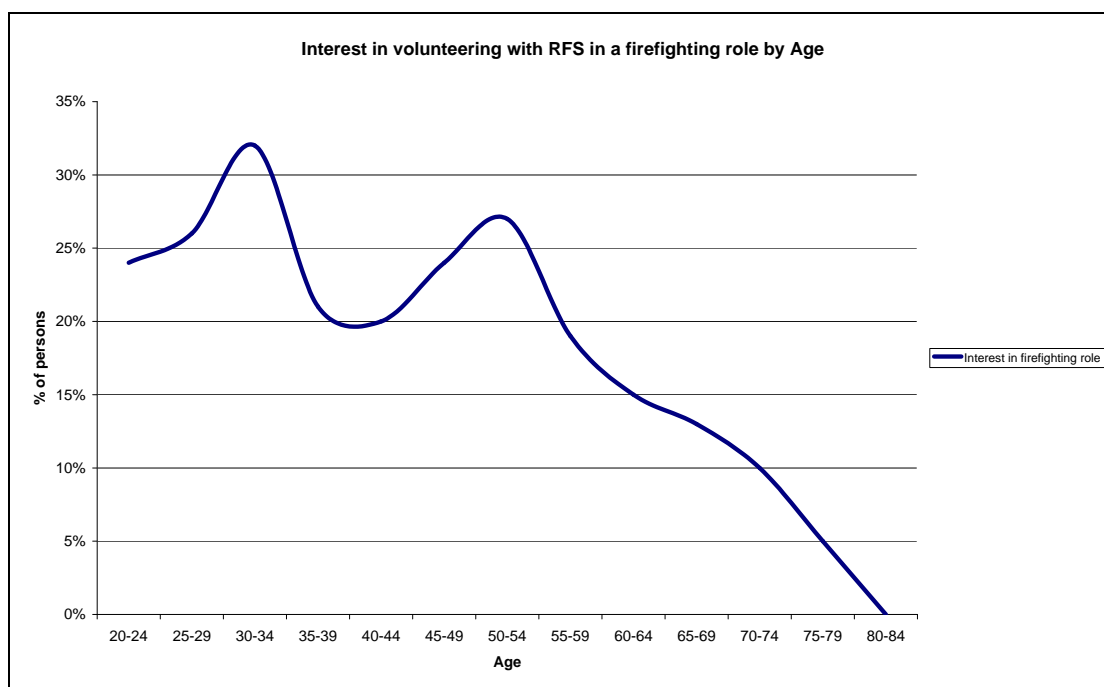


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents in each age category expressing “Interest” in volunteering with RFS in a fire-fighting role

Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents within each 5-year age group who thought it was “Likely” that they would volunteer with RFS for a fire-fighting role over the next 12 months. The “Likelihood” trend line shadows the “Interest” trend line, declining from about 15% for respondents in their early 20’s to about 5% for respondents over 60. As with the “Interest” line, the “Likelihood” line shows a peak for respondents in their early 30’s and a deep trough for respondents around the age of 40. Respondents show a modest resurgence in “Likelihood” from their late 40’s to around the age of 60.

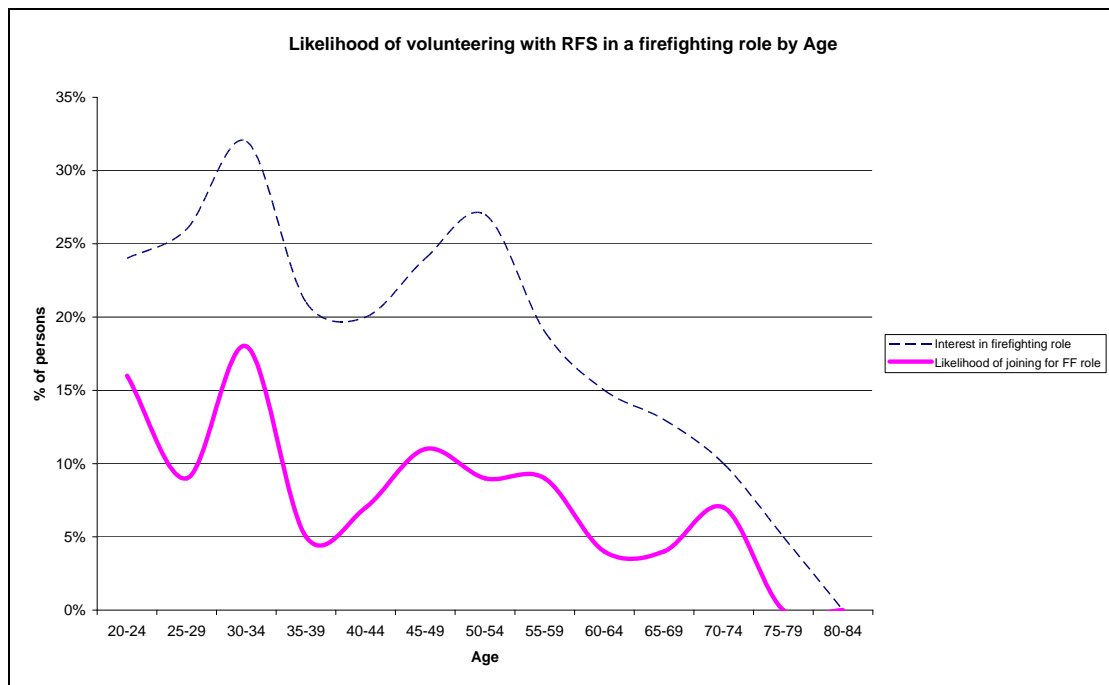


Figure 2. The percentage of persons who think they are “Likely” to join RFS for a fire-fighting role in the next 12 months

The graph in Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents within each 5-year age group who expressed “Interest” in volunteering for a specialist, non fire-fighting role. “Interest” in non fire-fighting roles is higher, (approximately 40%), than “Interest” in fire-fighting roles (approximately 20%). “Interest” in non fire-fighting roles does not decline with age to the same extent as “Interest” in fire-fighting roles, at least until the age of about 70. However, it does fluctuate with age, peaking at age 30 and age 50 and dipping at about the age of 40.

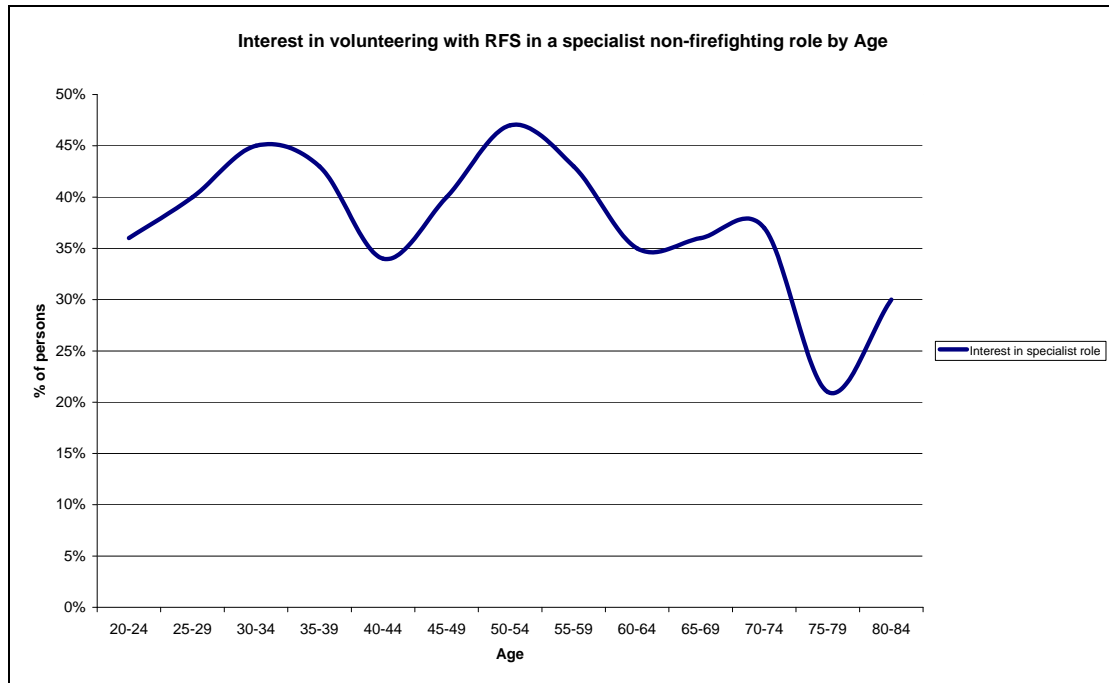


Figure 3. Proportion of respondents in each age category expressing “Interest” in volunteering with RFS in a specialist non fire-fighting role

The graph in Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents within each 5-year age group who thought it “Likely” that they would volunteer with RFS for a specialist, non fire-fighting role during the next 12 months. The “Likelihood” line is generally horizontal at around 13%, indicating that respondents think they are equally “Likely” to volunteer for a non fire-fighting role regardless of age. However, the trend line fluctuates with peaks at ages of 30, 50 and 60 and a significant trough around the age of 40. The ratio between “Interest” and “Likelihood” in non fire-fighting roles (3.5:1) is larger than the corresponding ratio for fire-fighting roles (2.5:1).

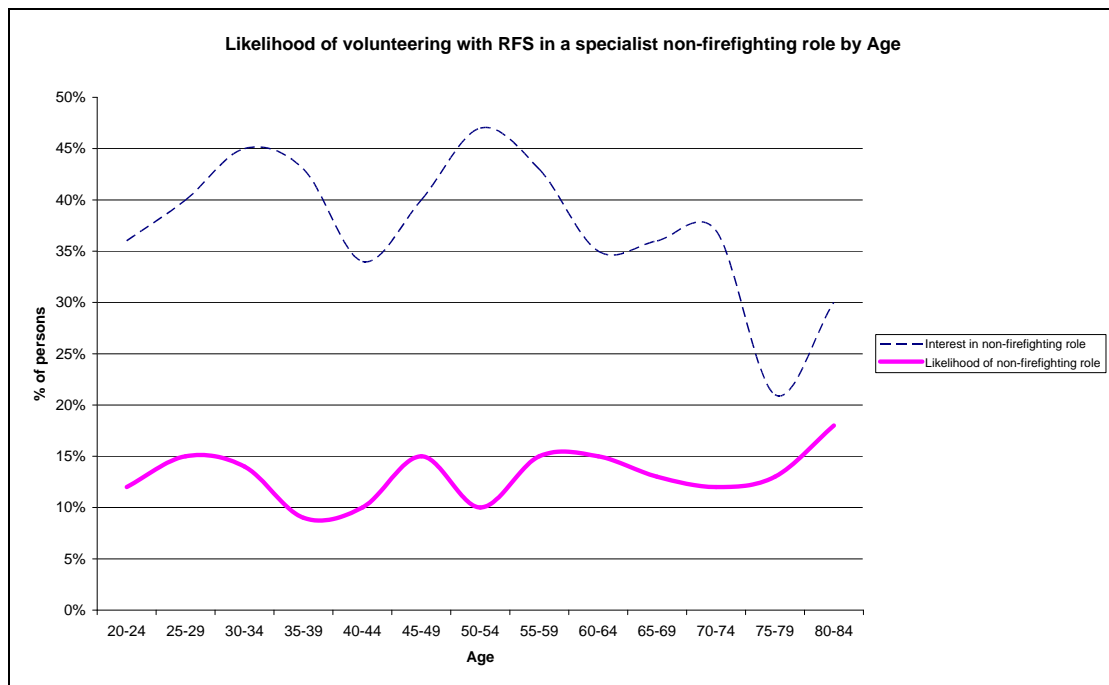


Figure 4. Proportion of respondents reporting that they are “Likely” to join RFS for a specialist, non fire-fighting role during the next 12 months

It is notable that the fluctuations of “Interest” in non fire-fighting roles are consistent with those in the fire-fighting roles.

The preceding four analyses measure the motivation towards and self-assessed “Likelihood” of volunteering with RFS within 5-year age groups. However, it does not take into account the relative distribution of people across the age groups.

At first glance, the peaks in “Interest” at particular age brackets in Figure 1 to Figure 4 suggest age groups that might be more responsive to recruitment initiatives; however the graphs above mask variations in population numbers for different age brackets. The graph in Figure 5 below shows the age distribution of the population of the whole of NSW aged 20-84 (the heavy black line). The population distribution for the survey area, based on Census data, has been plotted for comparison (the broken line).

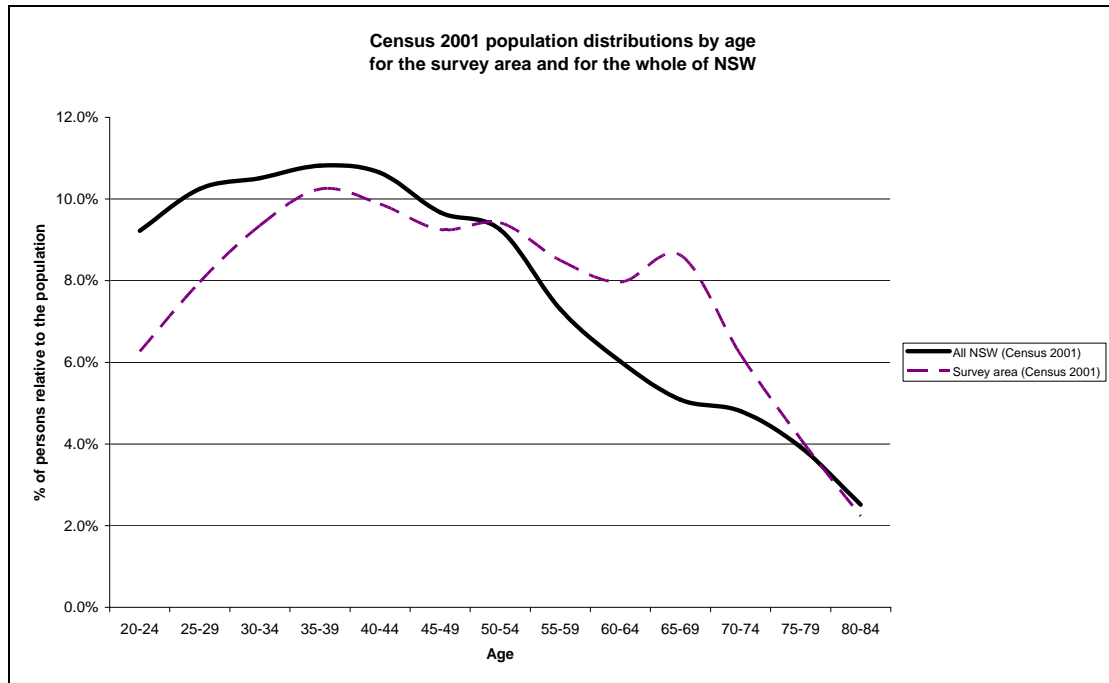


Figure 5. Census 2001 population distributions by age for the survey area and for the whole of NSW (Source, ABS and the NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning & Natural Resources)

The Census figures show that in the survey area there are relatively fewer persons in age groups below 40 than for NSW as a whole. In fact, for the survey area there is a population deficiency, relative to the rest of the state, for all age groups below the age of 50, and a surplus for all age groups over the age of 50. The deficiency of persons in the younger age groups must be taken into account when assessing the availability of prospective RFS volunteers. Whilst the earlier analyses in Figure 1 to Figure 4 indicate that younger respondents are more interested and more likely to volunteer with RFS as fire-fighters, unfortunately there are relatively fewer of them available in surveyed communities.

Availability of people for volunteering

The graph* in Figure 6 shows the age-distribution of “Interest” in fire-fighter roles, adjusted to reflect the relative number of persons available in the Region in each age group. The percentages on the vertical axis are now calculated relative to the total (“Interested” plus “Not Interested”) across all age groups rather than the total within each 5-year age group as was the case in Figure 1. It is clear that the peak at the age of 30, that was evident in Figure 1, is now significantly lower than the peak at the age of 50 because there are relatively fewer 30 year olds in the survey population.

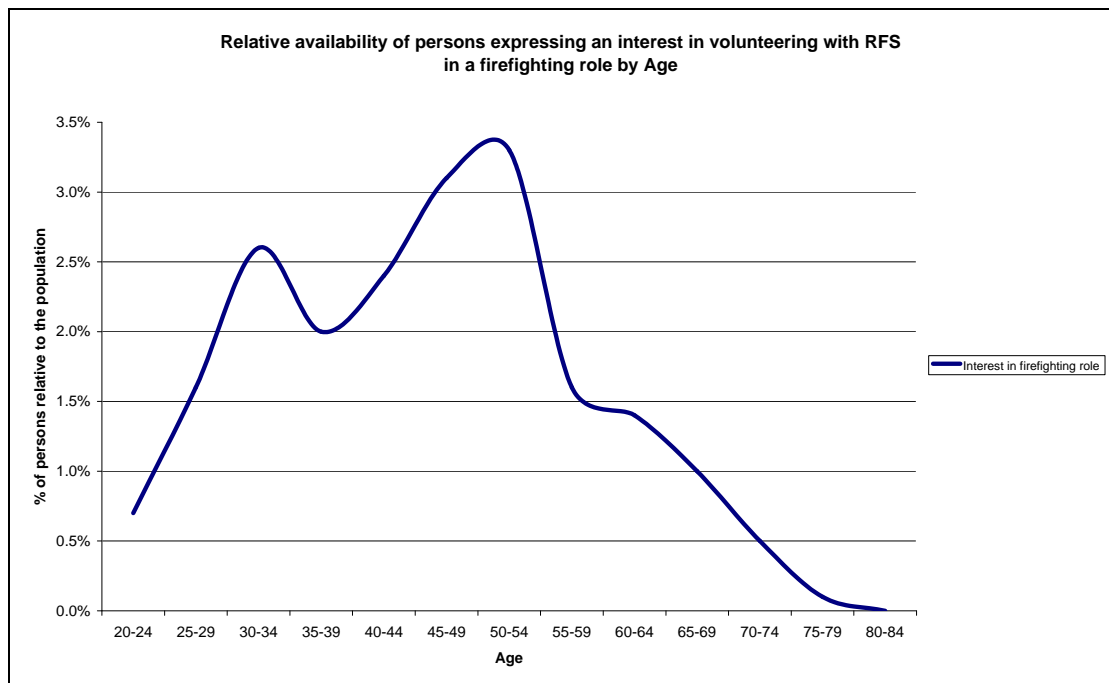


Figure 6. Proportion of respondents, as a percentage of the total, expressing “Interest” in volunteering with RFS in a fire-fighting role. Note the peak at about age 30 is now relatively lower than the peak at around age 50 compared with Figure 1.

* Note that the percentages in Figure 6 on the vertical axis are relatively lower than the percentages in Figure 1 because they are calculated relative to the distribution total rather than relative to the total (“Interested” plus “Not Interested”) within each 5-year age group. For example, Figure 1 should be read as meaning that 27% of respondents aged 50-54 expressed “Interest” in volunteering as fire-fighters, whereas Figure 6 should be read as meaning that 3.3% of all respondents were aged 50-54 and expressed “Interest” in volunteering as fire-fighters.

The graph in Figure 7 shows the age-distribution of respondents who thought they were “Likely” to volunteer with RFS during the next 12 months in a fire-fighting role. As with Figure 6, the peak of “Likelihood” at age 30 is reduced because there are fewer persons in that age group relative to the other age groups. The result is that the availability of persons who are “Likely” to volunteer for a fire-fighting role at the age of 30 is here reduced to about the same as it is at the age of 50. The trough in the “Likelihood” of volunteering at around the age of 40 is now a prominent feature of the distribution.

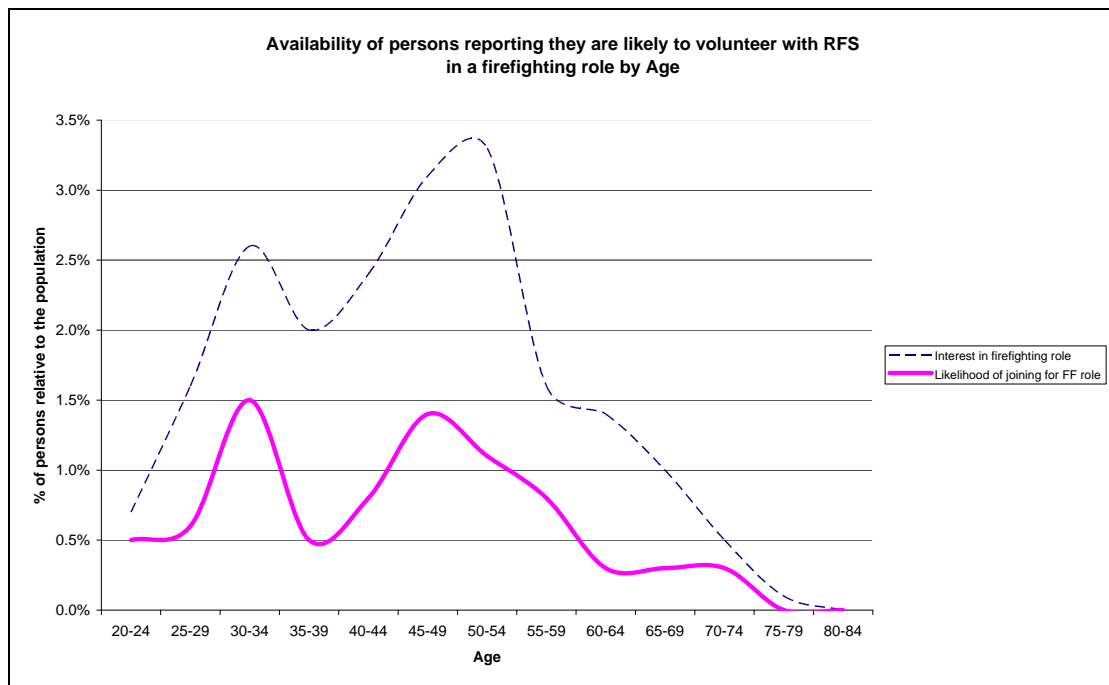


Figure 7. Proportion of respondents, as a percentage of the total, who think they are “Likely” to volunteer with RFS in a fire-fighting role. Note that the peak at about age 30 is now relatively lower than the peak at around age 50 compared with Figure 2.

The graph in Figure 8 shows the age-distribution of “Interest” in specialist, non-fire-fighter roles, adjusted to reflect the relative number of persons in the Region across all age groups. Compared with Figure 3, the most notable feature is the absence of the peak at the age of 30. However, the *availability* of respondents expressing “Interest” is consistently strong from the age of 30 to the age of 65 with a significant peak at the age of about 50.

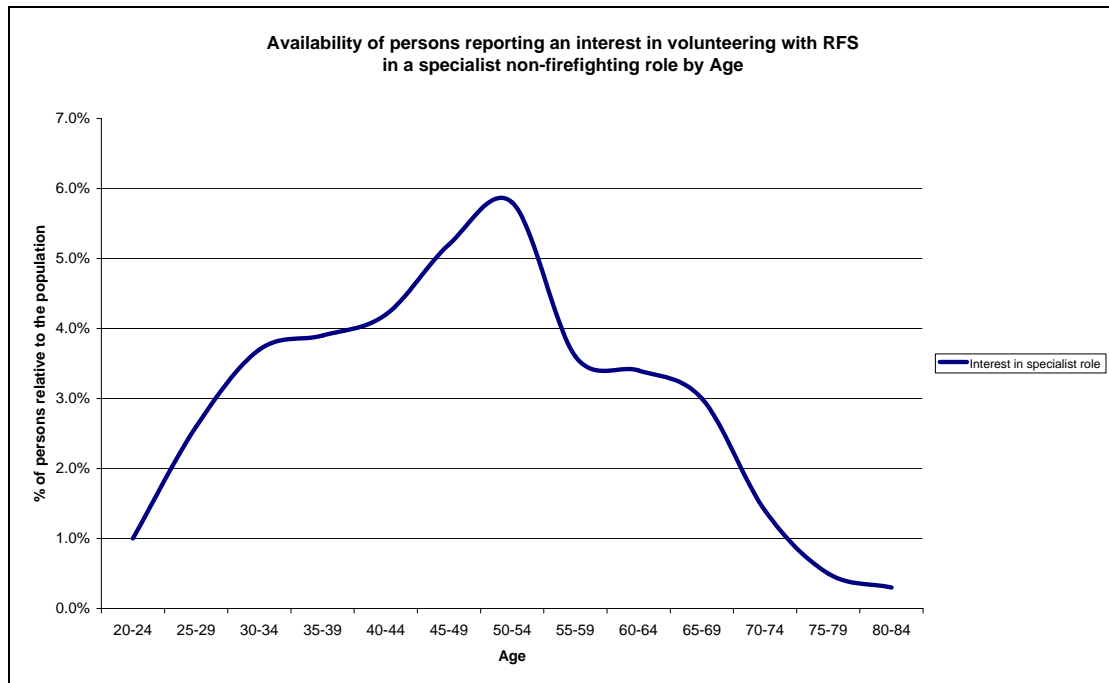


Figure 8. Proportion of respondents, as a percentage of the total, expressing “Interest” in volunteering with RFS in a non fire-fighting role. Note the peak at about age 30, evident in Figure 3 has disappeared leaving only the peak at around age 50.

The graph in Figure 9 shows the age-distribution of respondents who thought they were “Likely” to volunteer with RFS during the next 12 months in a specialist, non fire-fighting role. The *availability* of people “Likely” to volunteer in a non fire-fighting role is fairly consistent from the age of about 25 through to the age of about 65. There is a slight drop at about the age of 37 and a significant peak at about the age of 47.

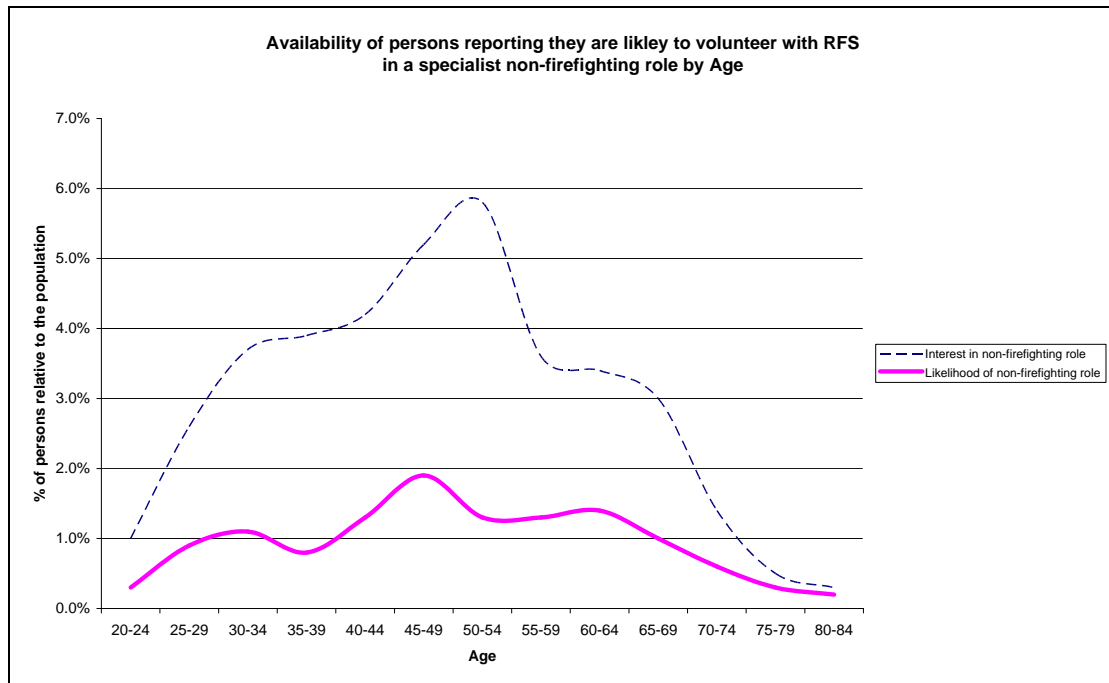


Figure 9. Proportion of respondents, as a percentage of the total, who think they are “Likely” to volunteer with RFS in a specialist, non fire-fighting role. Note that the peak availability of people occurs for respondents slightly below the age of 50. This graph can be compared with Figure 4

The *availability* of people in the survey area who are “Likely” to volunteer for fire-fighting roles diminishes with age, but also appears to be subject to lifecycle factors. There is a significant dip in the *availability* of people around the age of 40. There appears to be a 5-year period around the age of 30 when people are more readily *available* for fire-fighting roles. It is possible that the high churning rates reported by fire agencies are partly the result of recruits joining brigades in their late 20’s but then encountering lifecycle factors such as increased family or work responsibilities in their late 30’s that compel them to resign.

The *availability* of people in the survey area who are “Likely” to volunteer for specialist, non fire-fighting roles does not diminish with age until the age of about 65; in fact it appears to increase slightly. Again, there is a dip in *availability* amongst people around the age of 37, presumably due to lifecycle factors, and also a peak in *availability* of people around the age of 47.

Overall, about 8% of respondents thought they were “Likely” to volunteer for a fire-fighting role during the next 12 months while around 12.5% of respondents thought they were “Likely” to volunteer for a non fire-fighting role.

Barriers to volunteering with RFS

Respondents were asked to think about the reasons why they might *not* join RFS. They were given a table listing 37 suggested reasons for not joining and asked to indicate the importance of each reason to them. The possible choices were:

1. Major Reason;
2. Minor Reason;
3. Not Important;
4. Not Applicable.

In order to present the results in the clearest possible way, responses where items have been identified as “Major Reasons” or “Minor Reasons” have been combined and counted simply as “Barriers”. As such, the barriers discussed below should not be considered as *preventing* a respondent from volunteering but in most cases merely *discouraging* them from doing so.

In the following analysis we have looked at only those respondents who have never been members of RFS (N=1,046). On average, about 825 respondents provided valid responses to the separate questionnaire items that make up this table.

No.	Barriers discouraging respondents from volunteering with RFS	Percent identified as a "Major" or "Minor" barrier
1	I have spare time but it is unpredictable so I couldn't meet regular commitments	49%
2	I don't have any spare time after work/business/farm & family commitments	45%
3	Volunteering with the RFS is a low priority for me	44%
4	If there's a big enough fire I'll be there to help anyway, so I don't need to join the RFS	42%
5	I can't leave my work/business or farm to attend fires	41%
6	My first priority is to protect my own property and my neighbours/family/friends' properties. I can't do that if I'm off somewhere else with the RFS	40%
7	I would be concerned about my safety	40%
8	I'm not suited for the kinds of things fire fighters do	39%
9	I would rather help by donating to RFS	38%
10	I'm too old to be fighting fires	37%
11	I wouldn't find fighting fires enjoyable	36%
12	I have poor health, poor fitness or other disabilities that prevent me from volunteering	36%
13	I wouldn't be able to leave my family duties to go to fires	36%
14	I'm concerned about loss of income if I'm injured	36%
15	I didn't know they needed more volunteers	33%
16	Volunteering with the RFS just doesn't interest me	33%
17	I'm concerned about being sued by someone	32%
18	I would find it too upsetting/distressing/frightening	31%
19	The RFS has become too bureaucratic	30%
20	RFS volunteering takes too much time	29%
21	I don't know how to become a volunteer	28%
22	Things are too tough for me financially	27%
23	My employer wouldn't be happy about me attending fires	26%
24	I have spare time, I just prefer to use it doing other things	26%
25	I don't have anyone to mind the children	26%
26	I believe the fire brigade should be paid, not made up of volunteers	25%
27	My family wouldn't be happy about me joining	23%
28	The RFS is not sufficiently supported by the government/council so I'm not prepared to give up <i>my</i> time	21%
29	The local brigade has too much internal politics	21%
30	I don't want to take a job away from a paid fire-fighter	20%
31	I feel I wouldn't fit in with members of the local brigade	20%
32	I work too far from the fire station to respond in time	19%
33	I didn't realise the fire brigade was made up of volunteers	18%
34	I am concerned about personal costs like petrol when I drive to training or call-outs	18%
35	I don't think we need a local fire brigade	17%
36	I live too far from the fire station to respond in time	16%
37	I don't have any transport to get to the fire station	11%
	Mean	30%

Table 3. Barriers to volunteering with RFS, listed in rank order

Time and priorities

Clearly the major barrier to people volunteering with RFS is a perceived lack of time *and* the unpredictable nature of their time commitments. 49% of respondents believed that the unpredictable nature of their existing commitments was a barrier (Item 1). 45% reported that they did not have any spare time after their existing work/business/family or farm commitments (Item 2).

A shortage of time can be seen as a question of allocating personal priorities. 44% of respondents report that “volunteering with RFS is a low priority” (Item 3).

Significantly, 29% of respondents thought that “RFS volunteering takes too much time” (Item 20). In other words, whilst half the respondents regard their own inherent lack of time as a barrier, one third of all respondents believe that the time demands of imposed by RFS would be excessive for them.

41% of respondents indicated that “my first priority is to protect my own property and my neighbours/family/friends’ properties. I can’t do that if I’m off somewhere else with the RFS” (Item 6). This implies rejection of the idea of an organised, community-based, centrally coordinated fire service. RFS may wish to invest more effort in explaining to the community the rationale for having a centrally organised fire service.

There is also anecdotal evidence that this self-sufficient attitude has been reinforced by publicity of the “stay or go” policy in the media, which encourages people to stay home to protect their own properties when there is the threat of wildfire.

33% of respondents indicated that volunteering with RFS was not merely a low priority but “just does not interest me” (Item 16), and 27% of respondents indicated that they had “spare time [but] just prefer to do other things” (Item 24). The implication of these two items is that for about one third of the population in the Region, RFS will face a difficult task trying to persuade them to become involved in any way with the organisation.

Work/business/farm Obligations

43% of respondents indicated that they could not leave their work, business or farm to attend fires (Item 5). Whilst many people may hold indispensable positions at their place of work, there are no doubt others who could leave their workplace for a limited time on some occasions without unduly disrupting the enterprise. There may be some benefit in RFS investing more resources in educating employers, employees and the community at large about the necessity for volunteer emergency service workers to be excused from work or their business from time to time.

Anti-institutional

42% of respondents saw no need to formally join RFS; agreeing with the statement “if there’s a big enough fire I’ll be there to help anyway, so there’s no need to join the RFS” (Item 6).

This attitude of autonomy leaves others to carry the responsibility of maintaining a reliable local fire brigade to respond to more routine fires and incidents. It also raises questions about the preparedness of these respondents in terms of training, health, fitness and discipline if they do respond to a fire. Their lack of formal registration with RFS, and questions of training and fitness may compromise any insurance cover that would otherwise protect them. Their presence at large fires may be of value but it may also interfere with coordinated fire-fighting operations in a variety of ways.

42% represents a substantial proportion of the population who either do not recognise the benefits of joining a formally organised fire service, or for some reason feel

alienated by RFS or their local brigade. It is highly likely that RFS would benefit from better explaining the benefits of a centrally organised fire service, and actively seeking to engage those who may feel alienated from the Service. RFS senior management may wish to consider the potential benefits of commissioning a project to devise a comprehensive community education and marketing campaign to generate more positive attitudes to RFS.

Safety & income protection

40% of respondents cited concerns about safety as a barrier to joining (Item 7). 36% were concerned about the potential for loss of income if they were injured (Item 14). RFS may benefit from publicising its safety culture, low injury statistics and fire-fighter income protection arrangements.

Not suited to the kinds of things fire-fighters do

39% of respondents indicated that they thought they were “not suited for the kinds of things fire-fighters do” (Item 8). Many of these respondents may be unaware of the non-operational roles available in RFS. Publicity of non fire-fighting roles may increase the levels of interest in volunteering among members of this group.

Would rather help by donating to RFS

38% of respondents indicated that they would rather help RFS by making donations [in cash or kind] (Item 9) than by joining. This represents a substantial body of goodwill in the community and one that RFS and brigades should actively seek to harness. However, in small communities that are suffering an absolute shortage of people able-bodied for fire-fighting, perhaps people who “rather donate” could be encouraged to consider whether they, in fact, are also capable of volunteering.

Old Age

37% of respondents indicated that they felt they were too old to be fighting fires (Item 10). The graph in Figure 10, shows the proportion of the population who are *unavailable* for volunteering as fire-fighters because they regard themselves as too old. The age barrier is first observed at about the age of 30 and has its greatest impact at about the age of 67.

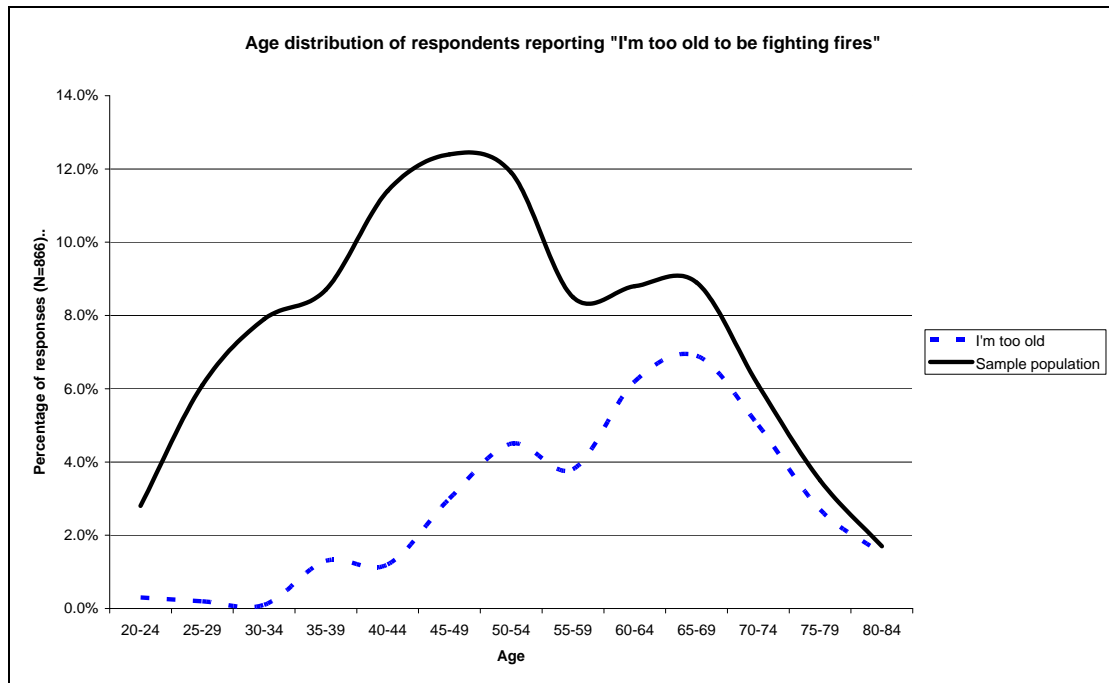


Figure 10. Age breakdown of respondents reporting "I'm too old to be fighting fires".

Interestingly, this is almost the same proportion as those who indicate that poor health, poor fitness or other disabilities are barriers. However, further analysis shows that there is only a 50% overlap between respondents who report poor health etc. as a barrier and those who also report old age as a barrier. It is surprising to find people aged below about 50 reporting that they consider themselves too old for fighting fires.

Poor health, poor fitness or disabilities

36% of respondents indicated that “poor health, poor fitness or other disabilities prevented them from volunteering” (Item 12). The graph in Figure 11 shows the age distribution of respondents reporting that poor health issues are a barrier to them volunteering. From the early 30’s health becomes increasingly important in making people *unavailable* to volunteer with RFS, with the greatest impact occurring at the age of about 70. Again, some members of this group may be able to contribute to RFS in non fire-fighting roles if they are aware of them.

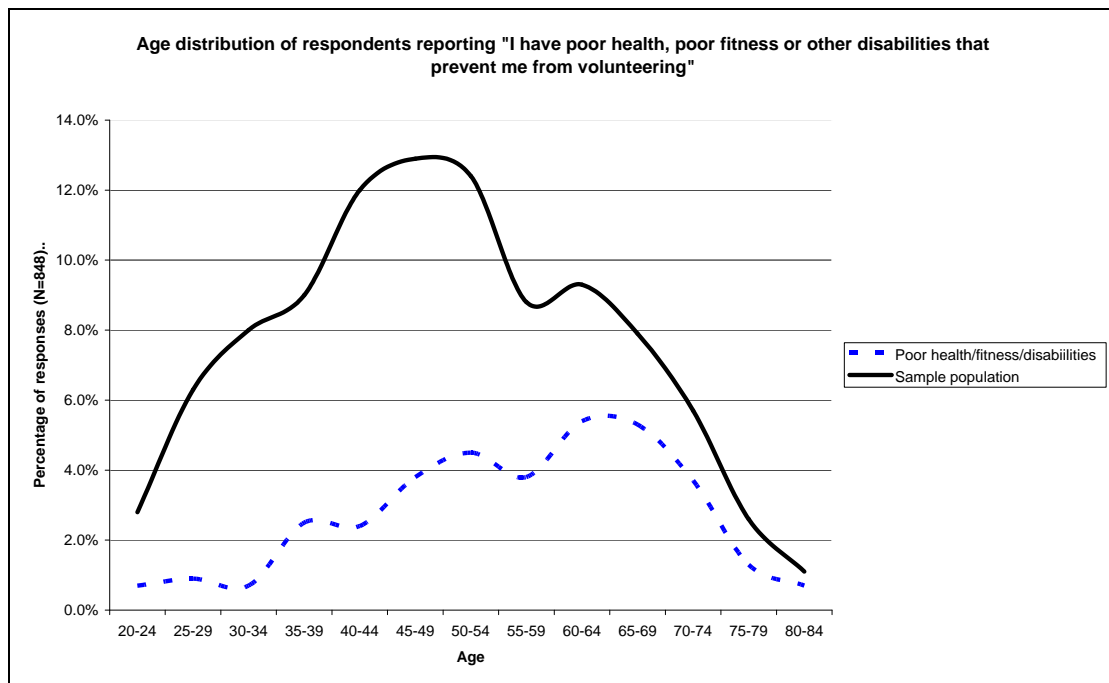


Figure 11 Age distribution of respondents reporting “I have poor health, poor fitness or disabilities that prevent me from volunteering” [with RFS].

Family duties

36% of respondents indicated that they could not leave their family duties to go to fires (Item 13). RFS may do well to cultivate mutual support arrangements within communities to help free people from their family care responsibilities. It may also benefit from reviewing the scheduling of brigade activities such as training and meetings to accommodate people with competing demands of family responsibility.

Didn’t know RFS needed volunteers

33% of respondents indicated that they did not know RFS needed more volunteers (Item 15). This is a sizeable proportion of the population and suggests that more could be done to communicate the need for volunteers to the community.

Would not find fighting fires enjoyable

34% of respondents indicated that they would not find fighting fires enjoyable (Item 13). Again, opportunities for participating in non fire-fighting roles could be publicised to attract some members of this group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many existing RFS volunteers, particularly in rural areas; do not find fighting fires enjoyable, but rather an onerous necessity.

Legal liability

32% of respondents indicated that they were concerned about the possibility of being sued in the course of RFS activities (Item 14). This is a sizeable proportion of the community and RFS would do well to address the concerns of potential recruits about their legal liabilities. RFS might consider informing the community about the true nature of the liabilities of its volunteers and publicising whatever legal protections it affords to them.

Too upsetting/distressing/frightening

31% of respondents believed that they would find RFS activities too upsetting, distressing, or frightening (Item 18). Gender is a significant factor in determining whether respondents thought they would find RFS work too distressing. 17% of male respondents thought it would be too distressing whereas 40% of female respondents felt that way. Many such respondents may still be comfortable volunteering with RFS in specialist, non-operational roles, at least initially so that they can form a realistic appreciation of what operational fire fighting does and does not entail.

Too bureaucratic

30% of respondents reported that they thought RFS had “become too bureaucratic” (Item 19). This complaint was also raised by a number of respondents in the free text sections of the questionnaire. There have been a number of developments over the past decade that could contribute to this feeling, including the transition from bushfire brigades to RFS, and the introduction of more standardised training and accreditation requirements. It is noteworthy that this perception exists among so many people who have never been members of RFS. This may be an additional reason for RFS senior management to consider commissioning a community education campaign.

Don't know how to join

28% of respondents reported that they did not know “how to become a volunteer” with RFS. This represents a sizeable proportion of the population who may be potential volunteers but are missed because they do not know how to apply to join. There may be a need to improve the message in RFS volunteerism publicity, to clearly set out the pathways for applying to volunteer.

Financial hardship

27% of respondents reported that “things are too tough for me financially” to volunteer (Item 22). Given the impact of the drought and other financial stresses on rural communities in NSW it is surprising that this barrier was not more highly ranked. RFS needs to be mindful of any direct and indirect financial costs and risks entailed in volunteering as a fire-fighter. The service may benefit from publicising ways in which it offsets some of those costs and risks, for example by providing personal protective clothing and income protection insurance.

Employer wouldn't be happy

26% of respondents reported believing that their “employer wouldn't be happy about [them] attending fires” (Item 23). There may be a number of reasons why an employer might not be happy allowing employees to attend fires. Employers may lose the services of employees for short periods if they attend incidents during work

hours. Employers may continue to pay employees wages while they are absent attending incidents, which is a cost to the employer. More recently, some employers became concerned that employees who attended incidents, even outside work hours, may come to work affected by fatigue or other factors that could impact on safety in the workplace.

Issues related to the employers of volunteers are currently the subject of other studies by RFS and the Bushfire CRC.

Child minding

26% of respondents reported that they did not “have anyone to mind the children” (Item 25); however this modest percentage belies the true impact of the child minding problem. As might be anticipated, females are more likely to be concerned about child minding than males. It was nominated as a barrier by 35% of females and only 13% of male respondents.

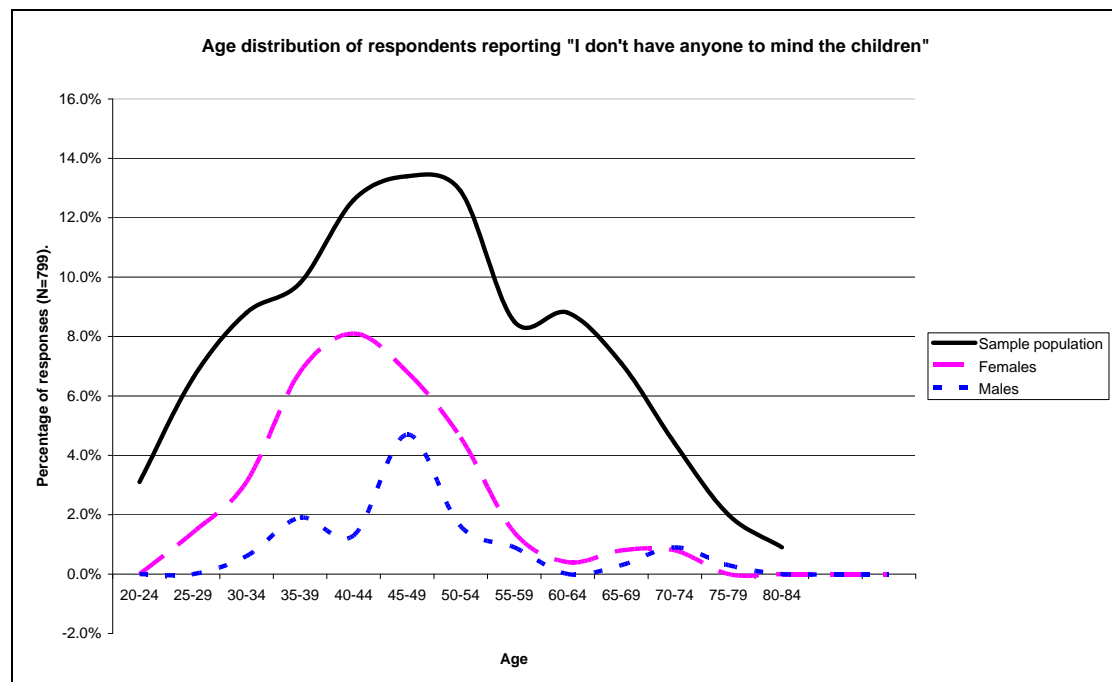


Figure 12. Age distribution of males and females reporting that "I don't have anyone to mind the children" is a barrier to joining RFS.

The graph in Figure 12 shows that a lack of child minding substantially reduces the availability of women from their late 20's to their early 50's. These of course are the years when they are otherwise most physically able to undertake fire-fighting roles. Any initiatives RFS can take to facilitate safe child minding could significantly improve the number of female volunteers available for fire-fighting roles. This may also significantly ease daytime crewing problems.

The graph also shows that child minding significantly reduces the availability of men for volunteering with RFS, particularly for men in their late 40's. These findings will be the subject of further analysis published in future reports.

The fire brigade should not be made up of volunteers

25% of respondents reported that they thought “the fire brigade should be paid, not made up of volunteers” (Item 26). To the extent that there are sound economic or even community-building arguments for persisting with volunteer fire brigades, RFS may find that more effective communication of those arguments helps its cause, both in recruitment and in support for volunteers from other members of the community.

My family would not be happy about me joining

23% of respondents reported that they thought their family would not be happy about them joining (Item 27). We will conduct further analyses in the future in regard to what type of respondents have these concerns, but similar comments apply as to the previous point, that RFS could benefit from actively promoting the case for having volunteer fire brigades to the wider community.

Government or council do not support RFS so why should I

21% of respondents agreed with the assertion that “the RFS is not sufficiently supported by the government/council so I’m not prepared to give up *my* time” (Item 28). It is a matter of concern that this percentage of the population, who have never been members of RFS, perceive that state and/or local government are not doing their share to support the organisation. It may be useful to conduct further research into the specific issues that lead to this negative perception.

The local brigade has too much internal politics

21% of respondents state that the internal political climate in their local brigade discourages them from wanting to join (Item 29). Though not one of the primary barriers, if one fifth of the community who have never been members of RFS brigades feel this way, then arguably a number of brigades have a serious image problem. RFS may need to intervene with initiatives such as improved leadership training for brigade officers and managers.

I do not want to take a job away from a paid fire-fighter

20% of respondents avoid volunteering because they are concerned that they might be taking a job away from a paid fire-fighter. This item is similar to Item 26, the belief that fire-fighters should be paid not volunteers. To the extent that there are good economic reasons for not employing career fire-fighters for RFS brigades, these reasons might need to be better articulated to the wider community.

I feel I would not fit in

20% of respondents felt that they would not fit in with members of their local brigade (Item 31). This is similar to item 29, “too much internal politics” and was nominated by almost the same proportion of the population.

Fire is a hazard for every member of the community. Fire brigades are funded and supported by the whole community; so arguably, anyone of good character should be entitled to participate in their local fire brigade and feel welcome. There is anecdotal evidence that some brigades are less than inclusive in their attitude to new members and according to this result, overall one fifth of the community holds that perception. If some brigades are less welcoming than others; are there systemic reasons for this such as RFS-imposed caps on brigade size or supply of PPC, that encourage them to be very selective?

I work too far from the fire station

19% of respondents believed that they “work too from the fire station to respond in time” (Item 32). This is a significant proportion of the population. Whilst some workers such as long-distance truck drivers may be too mobile to turn-out during working hours, for others there may be value in considering creative solutions. Practical approaches, such as allowing and facilitating members to turn-out with other brigades that are close to their place of work, may be worth exploring.

I did not realise the brigade was made up of volunteers

18% of respondents “didn’t realise that their local brigade was made up of volunteers” (Item 33). For respondents living in larger rural towns that have a NSW Fire Brigades station, they may be correct. However, it is also likely that people who have moved into rural areas from a metropolitan area may be largely oblivious to the volunteer nature of rural brigades. Again, however, RFS may do well to promote the nature of the organisation to the wider community.

Concern regarding out of pocket expenses

18% of respondents reported that they were “concerned about personal costs like petrol when [they] drive to training or call-outs” (Item 34). The survey pre-dated the recent steep rises in the cost of petrol, and it is likely that this is now more of an issue than the data indicate. However, it is useful to note that this relatively concrete factor is one of the lower ranked issues identified by respondents.

We do not need a local fire brigade

17% of respondents indicated they thought there was no need for a local fire brigade. This is an interesting finding and will be the subject of further analysis in the future.

I live too far from the fire station

16% of respondents reported that they thought they lived “too far from the fire station to respond in time” (Item 36). If it does not already do so, RFS might give consideration to permitting volunteers who live long distances from their fire station to turn-out directly to fires. There are various risks inherent in this practice that might require special management, but it offers the possibility of improving overall volunteer numbers and response times to remote areas.

No transport to get the fire station

Only 11% of respondents indicated that they “don’t have any transport to get to the fire station” (Item 37). This practical, logistical barrier to volunteering with RFS was the least nominated of the 37 suggested in the questionnaire.

Factors easing the path to volunteering

Respondents were asked what RFS or the local brigade could do to make it easier for them to become a volunteer. They were given a table listing 9 suggested initiatives and asked to indicate how helpful each one would be to them. The possible choices were:

1. Very Helpful;
2. Somewhat Helpful;
3. Not Helpful;
4. Not Applicable.

As with the “barriers” section above, in order to present the results in the clearest possible way, responses where items have been identified as “Very Helpful” or “Somewhat Helpful” have been combined and counted simply as “Helpful”. As such, the “Helpful” factors discussed below should not be considered as *guaranteeing* that a respondent will volunteer, but in most cases simply as *making it easier* for them to do so.

In the following analyses we have looked at only those respondents who have never been members of RFS (N=1,046). On average, about 810 respondents provided valid responses to the each of the questionnaire items that make up this table.

No.	Factors that would make it easier to volunteer with RFS	Percent identifying item as "Very" or "Somewhat helpful"
1	Provide information sessions about volunteering with RFS	61%
2	Help me to develop skills that would be useful in other parts of my life (4WD driving, chainsaw use, leadership, computers, first aid)	57%
3	Publicise intake dates for new volunteers	56%
4	Help me get qualifications that would help my career (workplace trainer certificate, heavy vehicle licence, first aid certificate)	52%
5	Help me to get started by introducing me to other brigade members and showing me how things work around the brigade	47%
6	Invite me personally to volunteer	38%
7	Make it easier for friends or family members to also become involved with RFS	32%
8	Assist with child-care during RFS activities	31%
9	Recognise my past fire fighting knowledge instead of making me retrain under the new system	16%
Mean		43%

Table 4. Factors that respondents reported would make it easier to volunteer, listed in order of importance.

Provide information sessions

61% of respondents thought that it would make it easier for them to volunteer if RFS, or their local brigade, provided information sessions about volunteering (Item 1).

An important theme that emerged in analysing barriers to joining was that members of the community outside RFS lacked information about the organisation. For example, many did not realise that RFS was made up of volunteers (18%), did not know how to join (28%), did not know they needed more volunteers (33%) or did not know what legal and income protection RFS provided to its volunteers (32% & 36% respectively).

There is a strong case here for RFS and brigades to substantially improve communication with the wider community about what they do and all aspects of volunteering with the organisation.

Help me develop useful skills

57% of respondents thought it would make it easier for them to volunteer if RFS helped them to develop skills that would be useful to them in other areas of their life such as off-road driving, chainsaw use, leadership skills, computer use and first aid (Item 2). Whilst there may be a risk that some individuals will try to exploit such assistance without giving adequately in return, the world of business thrives on arrangements of mutual benefit.

Publicise intake dates

56% of respondents indicated that it would be helpful if RFS and brigades publicised intake dates for new volunteers (Item 3). There are really two components to this item. First, establishing set intake dates gives people a specific timetable to focus their thinking about volunteering with RFS and to reorganise other parts of their lives accordingly. Set intake dates may help propel them to make a decision and take the necessary action. Secondly, if set intake dates are established, they need to be publicised effectively.

Help me to get career-relevant qualifications

52% of respondents thought it would be helpful if their volunteering with RFS helped them to get qualifications such as a heavy vehicle licence, workplace trainer's certificate, or a first aid qualification that would assist them in their career. As with item 2, there was a strong response to this item and it seems reasonable that where RFS can identify areas of personal development that would be of mutual benefit to both volunteers and the Service, it should make use of those opportunities.

Orientation program for new members

47% of respondents thought it would be helpful if someone were to help them get started by introducing them to brigade members and showing them how things work around the brigade (Item 5). Clearly, a good deal of the population find the prospect of joining a fire brigade a little daunting. It is possible that the serious and responsible role of fire brigades makes them more intimidating to join than, for example, local tennis clubs. RFS and brigades might consider formal orientation sessions for new members, if not a buddy or mentoring system extending over the first weeks or months after a new member joins.

Invite me personally to volunteer

38% of respondents felt that it would be helpful if they were personally invited to volunteer (Item 6). Previous research has indicated that people are far more responsive to a personal approach from a friend or acquaintance inviting them to join a brigade, than to mass advertising. This is particularly the case if it is clear to them that there is a role for them to play and they will be *making a difference*. In this sense, the existing brigade members are the best ambassadors for recruiting new membership. However, inviting friends and acquaintances to join may not come easily to some members, and RFS might benefit from coaching members in these skills.

Make it easier for friends or family to become involved

32% of respondents indicated that making it easier for friends or family to become involved would help them to join (Item 7). Previous research has indicated that brigade activities such as training and turn-outs take members away from their family and friends too much. There is anecdotal evidence that brigade activities tend to specialise around response-based activities, and that this tends to confine membership to the more robust and able-bodied members of the community. RFS and brigades might consider broadening the role of brigades to encompass activities such as community education. This has the potential to make brigades more inclusive of a broader cross-section of the community and allow more interaction between family and friends during brigade activities.

Assist with child-care

31% of respondents reported that some form of assistance with child-care would help them to join RFS (Item 8). This is consistent with the 26% of respondents who reported that having nobody to “mind the children” was a barrier to them joining. The issue of child care is clearly a problem in need of some solutions, and likely to free up a significant number of potential volunteers, particularly during the day.

Recognition of prior learning

16% of respondents reported that it would be helpful if RFS recognised their past fire fighting knowledge instead of making them re-train under new systems (Item 9). There is anecdotal evidence that people with longstanding fire-fighting experience feel offended and disenfranchised by requirements to undergo formal accreditation under recent training and certification initiatives. The response rate of 16% is low but this analysis excluded most people who are present or past members of RFS. The researchers understand that there are many people in rural communities who have been active in fire-fighting without necessarily being formally registered members of brigades. Further analysis will be undertaken in the future to evaluate the impact of this factor on people who have been involved with RFS or bushfire brigades in the past.

Appendix A - Sampling & Response

This survey was conducted in 29 communities in RFS Region West (central and western NSW) in mid-2005. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire[†]. The questionnaire was distributed to every private (i.e. non-business) postal address serviced by the post office in the survey towns. It was distributed in packs of two questionnaires, accompanied by a covering letter and two reply-paid envelopes addressed to the Bushfire CRC at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

The survey commenced in March 2005 with a pilot in the town of Trundle. Table 5 shows a list of the towns in the survey, the number of packages distributed and the approximate return rates. Instructions on the questionnaire indicated to recipients that completing the survey was voluntary and completely anonymous. The questionnaires were for people 18 years of age and who were not currently registered RFS volunteers. Current RFS volunteers were excluded because RFS was conducting a separate survey of its members at the time.

According to ABS 2001 Census data, on average 30% of the households in the surveyed towns are single-person households. As two questionnaires were delivered to each postal address, about 15% of the questionnaires would have been discarded by people in single-person households in which there was no-one available to complete the second questionnaire. Therefore, a return of 85% of the questionnaires would in fact constitute 100% of the possible return rate after allowing for the single-person households.

Pilot survey

The questionnaire was piloted in the community of Trundle commencing on Wednesday 9th of March 2005. It was preceded by a publicity campaign through regional radio and newspaper outlets organised by RFS. Survey packages were posted to every residential address (330) serviced by the Trundle Post Office. Returns from the pilot did not indicate any problems with the questionnaire and a response rate, adjusted to allow for single-person households, of 11% was achieved. The researchers and RFS agreed to proceed to the main survey without alteration to the questionnaire or sampling methodology.

Main survey

The main survey was distributed to the remaining twelve towns during the week commencing 6th June. Unfortunately, the return rate from the main survey was about half that of the pilot in Trundle. A total of 618 questionnaires (5.8%) had been returned by 20th July, significantly fewer than the target of 900-1,000 required for a reliable sample.

Extension survey

The decision was taken to extend the survey to additional towns to achieve the target of 1,000 returns. A further 16 towns were identified by Bushfire CRC personnel. Anecdotal evidence indicated that many members of the community do not distinguish between RFS and NSW Fire Brigades, which employs full-time and

[†] The questionnaire and covering letter are reproduced in Appendix B of this report.

retained fire-fighters. The decision was taken to give preference to towns without a NSW Fire Brigades unit in the town in order to ensure that respondents were reporting on RFS and not on NSW Fire Brigades. This tended to bias the sample towards smaller towns with a population (aged 15 +) of less than 550. The survey packages for the extension were distributed by post during the week commencing 22nd August 2005.

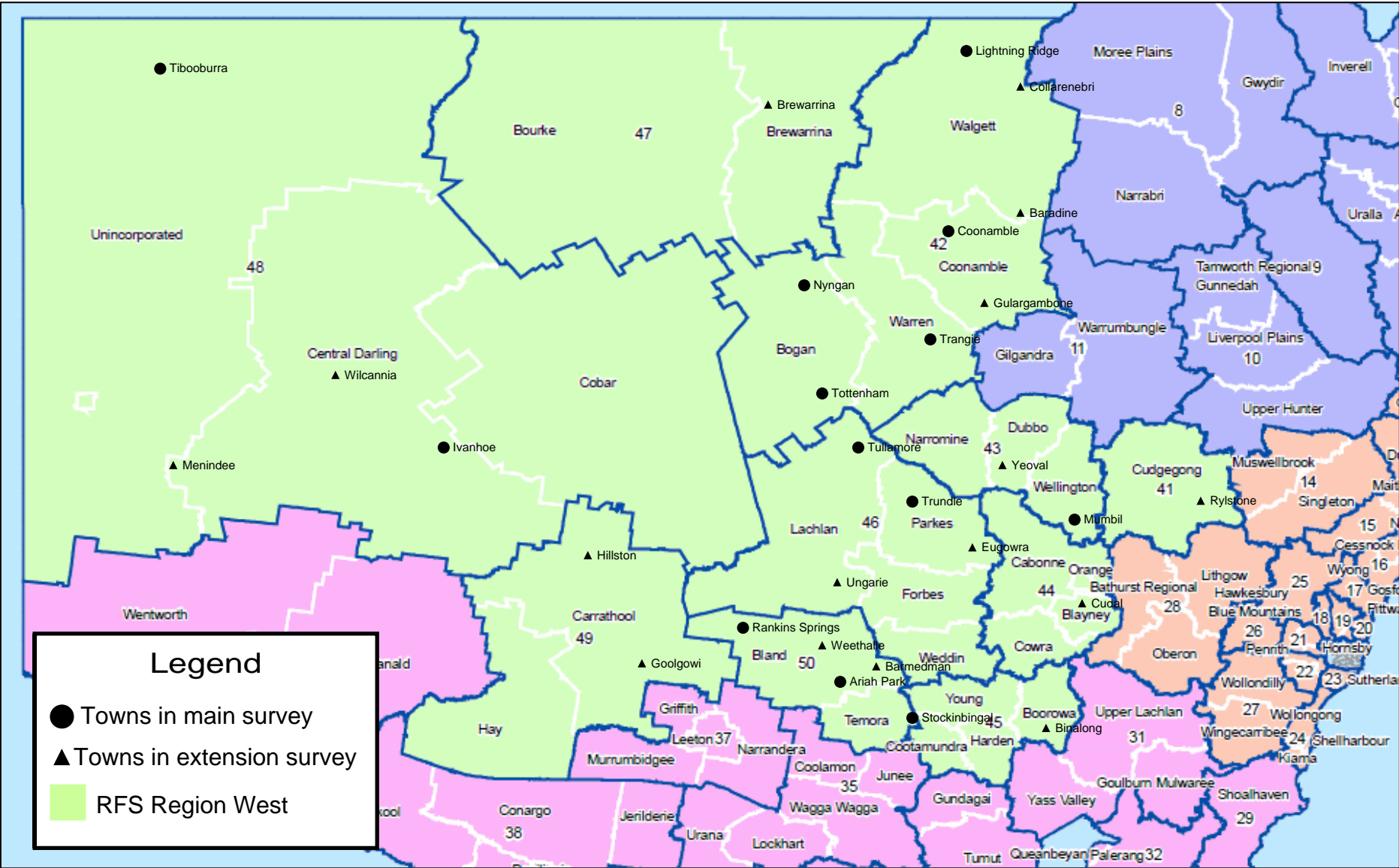
The return rate for the extension survey was about 6.5%, slightly better than for the main survey. By 20 October 2005 1,188 completed questionnaires had been returned by respondents and coded into the survey database.

It is clear from the questionnaires returned that a number of currently serving members responded to the survey despite the instructions in the covering letter and on the questionnaires. At least 54 respondents (4.5%) were currently serving RFS volunteers, whilst a further 52 respondents (4.4%) had been RFS volunteers at some indeterminate time, including possibly the present. A further 36 respondents (3%) were former volunteers in either RFS or one of the bushfire brigades that preceded it prior to 1997. Only the 1,046 respondents who had never been volunteers with RFS were used for this report. The remainder may provide valuable data for other reports in the future.

Survey Phase	Town	Postcode	Packages actually delivered	Completed questionnaires returned	Return rate, adjusted for the approx. 30% lone person households
Pilot Survey	Trundle (Pilot)	2875	316	59	11.0%
Main Survey	Ariah Park	2665	267	37	8.0%
	Coonamble	2829	1,332	154	6.6%
	Ivanhoe	2878	150	15	7.1%
	Lightning Ridge	2834	1,730	118	4.3%
	Mumbil	2820	110	16	11.1%
	Nyngan	2825	843	77	5.2%
	Rankins Springs	2669	156	14	5.1%
	Stockinbingal	2725	169	29	10.0%
	Tibooburra	2880	80	5	3.7%
	Tottenham	2873	327	38	6.8%
	Trangie	2823	486	51	6.1%
	Tullamore	2874	200	26	8.1%
	Subtotals (Pilot & Main)			5,850	580
Extension Survey	Barmedman	2668	189	24	7.3%
	Barellan	2665	259	14	3.1%
	Brewarrina	2839	562	44	4.5%
	Carinda	2831	159	4	1.4%
	Collarenebri	2833	283	10	2.0%
	Cudal	2864	313	39	7.2%
	Eugowra	2806	342	54	9.1%
	Goolgowi	2652	173	12	4.0%
	Gulargambone	2828	330	26	4.5%
	Hillston	2675	553	71	7.4%
	Menindee	2879	286	37	7.4%
	Rylstone	2849	635	125	11.3%
	Ungarie	2669	216	31	8.2%
	Weethalle	2669	115	13	6.5%
	Wilcannia	2836	215	11	2.9%
	Yeoval	2868	311	34	6.3%
	Subtotal (Extension)			4,940	549
Total			11,106	1,188	6.2%

Table 5. The communities surveyed and approximate response rate

Map of the Communities Surveyed



Appendix B - The Questionnaire

This Appendix contains a copy of the questionnaire and the covering letter that accompanied it. 22,212 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 11,106 households in the survey area by Australia Post's Unaddressed Bulk Mail Service, together with a reply-paid envelope addressed to La Trobe University.

All communications to be addressed to:

Region West
NSW Rural Fire Service
PO Box 1342
YOUNG NSW 2594

Region West
NSW Rural Fire Service
Shop 3, 21 Lovell Street
YOUNG NSW 2594



Telephone: (02) 63 82 5677
e-mail: andrew.dillon@rfs.nsw.gov.au

Facsimile: (02) 63 82 1731

2nd May, 2005

Dear Community Member

I am writing to you, as the Regional Manager for the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), to ask you to help us by completing and returning one of the enclosed survey forms. The survey is for anyone aged 18 years or older, who is not a currently serving RFS volunteer.

It is important that we know about the communities in the Region and how people see the RFS and its volunteer brigades. This helps us to make sure we have enough volunteers in the future to protect lives and property against fires.

The survey is anonymous, and survey forms have been delivered to most residences in the area. It is being done for the NSW RFS by the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre at La Trobe University. Completed survey forms go directly to La Trobe for processing. These will be kept secure and destroyed after five years. At no stage will the RFS be given the completed survey forms.

The La Trobe Bushfire CRC team will prepare a report for the Region with suggestions about things we could do to support volunteers and boost volunteer numbers in the future.

Do be assured that there will be no follow up letters, and no one from the survey team will phone or visit your house.

If you have any questions, you can contact Andrew Dillon at the Regional Office (ph 6382 5677), or you can contact the Manager of the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project, Bushfire CRC, La Trobe University, Bundoora VIC 3086 (ph 03 9479 2420). If you have any complaints or queries that the investigators have not been able to answer to your satisfaction you may contact the Ethics Liaison Officer, Human Ethics Committee, La Trobe University, Victoria, 3086 ph (03) 9479 1443, email: humanethics@latrobe.edu.au.

I invite you to participate in the survey by completing and mailing the form.

Thank you in anticipation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dillon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dominic Lane
Regional Manager
Region West

Note that participation in the survey is voluntary and refusal to participate in the survey will not result in any penalty. The survey is being funded jointly by the NSW Rural Fire Service and the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre.

Survey of Community Understanding about the NSW Rural Fire Service



The volunteers of Rural Fire Service brigades provide vital emergency services for the community of Coonamble. The RFS wants your views about how it is doing and how it could attract more volunteers. Completing and returning this survey will assist the RFS to better protect your community.

All information will be kept strictly confidential. This survey does NOT go back to the NSW Rural Fire Service, but is processed at La Trobe University in Melbourne. No identifying information will be in the report prepared by La Trobe University for NSW RFS.

This survey is for everyone aged 18 and over except currently registered RFS volunteers. If you are currently an RFS volunteer, give this survey to someone else over 18. Current RFS volunteers may be surveyed later in the year.

The survey will take about 30-45 minutes to complete.

The survey form is in four sections:

- sections A and D (the white pages) are for everyone to complete;
- section B (the yellow pages) is for everyone except recent RFS volunteers;
- section C (the green pages) is only for former RFS volunteers.

Please fill out the survey and post it back using the reply paid envelope **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**.

Section A - for everyone to complete

Are you: Male or Female? (Please tick one)

What year were you born? 19

Do you live in a town or village, or on a farm? In a town or village
Please tick one box On acreage (less than 20 hectares)
 A farm or rural property of 20 hectares or more
 Other
Please state

If you live in a town or village, is your property boundary next to farmland or bushland? Yes / No
Please circle "Yes" or "No"

What do you do?

Tick ALL that apply

- Farming
- Conduct your own business without employees?
- Conduct your own business with employees
- Paid Full Time employment (35 hours / week or more)
- Paid Part Time employment (less than 35 hours / week)
- Semi-retired
- Fully-retired
- Only able to work part-time due to sickness or disability
- Unable to work at all due to sickness or disability
- Part-time carer (for disabled, sick or elderly people)
- Full-time carer (for disabled, sick or elderly people)
- Care for children below primary school age
- Care for children of primary school age
- Care for children of secondary school age
- Home Duties
- Part-time student
- Full-time student

In the last 7 days, did you work in any paid jobs or your own business?

Yes / No (please circle one)

If you circled "Yes" above, what was your occupation in your main job or business in the last 7 days?

.....

- If you had more than one job then the 'main job' refers to the job in which you usually work the most hours.
- Example: *motor mechanic, plumbing apprentice, hotel manager, maths teacher, sheep and wheat farmer, shearer*

About how many hours did you work in all paid jobs or your business or farm during the past 7 days?

..... hours

About how long have you lived in your current Postcode area?

..... years

If you previously lived in a different Postcode area, where was that?

.....

Please write the Postcode or the name of the area where you lived prior to moving to this area

How do you feel about your local community?

For each of the following statements please tick a box to show how much you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Don't Know	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I'm on first name terms with many of my neighbours					
People here work together to try and improve conditions					
The people here make me feel part of a Community					
This place suits my way of life					
This is a place that would be widely regarded as being well off					
I want to make this a good place to live					

<p>How many people usually live in your household?</p> <p><i>Please write the number of people in each age group. Don't include people who normally live away from home for study or work.</i></p>	___ aged under 15
	___ 15 to 24
	___ 25 to 65
	___ Over 65

<p>Thinking of your circle of friends, do most of your closest friends live locally or elsewhere, for example somewhere you have lived previously.</p> <p><i>Please circle one</i></p>	<p>Locally / Elsewhere</p>
---	-----------------------------------

<p>Have you ever used any of the services of the RFS?</p> <p><i>Please circle</i></p>	<p>Yes / No</p>
--	------------------------

<p>Have you ever considered joining the RFS?</p> <p><i>Please circle</i></p>	<p>Yes / No</p>
<p>If "Yes", what steps did you take to join the RFS?</p> <p><i>Please tick one box.</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Didn't take any steps
	<input type="checkbox"/> Contacted my local brigade or the RFS
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>please state</i>

Section B – for everyone except recent RFS volunteers.

Have you been a member of a NSW RFS brigade at any time between 1997 and the present?

Yes / No

Please circle one

If you circled “Yes”, please skip the rest of this section and go to section C (the green section) starting on page 8.

We are interested to find out how much people know about the operation of the RFS.

How true do you think each of the following statements is about the RFS?

For each of the following of statements please tick a box to show “True” or “False”

	True	False	Don't know
The RFS coordinates fire fighting during large bushfires			
RFS fire fighters are unpaid volunteers			
The RFS is a separate organisation from NSW Fire Brigades			
Almost anyone can join the RFS			
The RFS protects its volunteers from loss of income if they are injured			
The RFS only fights bushfires and grass fires			
The RFS provides trucks, equipment and protective clothing to rural fire brigades in NSW			
The RFS works to protect the environment			
All brigade members must respond to every call-out			
The RFS is jointly funded by insurance companies, the NSW government and local councils			
The RFS provides fire safety advice to people living in bushfire prone areas			
The RFS provides fire safety education kits to schools			

Views about the RFS as a government agency

The Rural Fire Service is a state government agency that coordinates rural fire brigades throughout NSW. Thinking about how the RFS works across the whole of NSW, rather than your local RFS brigade, what are your views on the RFS?

For each of the following of statement, please tick a box to indicate whether you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Don't Know	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
The RFS provides excellent service to NSW					
The RFS provides good value for money					
The RFS trains its volunteers well					
The RFS is adequately funded					
The RFS supplies brigades with good equipment and technology					
You have to fight fires if you want to join the RFS					
Personally, I have a good opinion of the RFS					
Being involved in the RFS involves a lot of time					
The RFS is the kind of organisation I would like to be involved in					
I think most members of the community have a good opinion of the RFS					
The RFS encourages women as well as men to volunteer as fire-fighters					
The RFS learns from any mistakes and improves the way it operates					
The RFS changes to meet the needs of the community					
The RFS protects its volunteers from being sued for honest mistakes					
The RFS has a high profile in the community					

Views about your local RFS brigade

Now, thinking about your **local** RFS brigade as a group of volunteers, what is your view of your local brigade?
 For each of the following statements please tick a box to show how much you agree or disagree.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Don't Know	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
The local brigade provides excellent service to this community					
The local RFS brigade provides good value for money					
The local brigade trains its members well					
The local RFS brigade has the right equipment					
The local brigade is very capable					
Women should be encouraged to be fire-fighters					
Existing members of the local brigade go out of their way to make new members feel welcome					
Being involved in our local brigade involves a lot of time					
The local brigade is the kind of group I would like to be involved in					
The community has a good opinion of the local brigade					
The members of the local brigade are mostly over 40					
The local RFS brigade encourages women as well as men to volunteer as fire fighters					
The local brigade learns from any mistakes and improves the way it operates					
The local brigade members work well together as a team					
The local brigade changes to meet the needs of the community					
I would be confident in calling the local brigade to help me in the event of a fire					
The local brigade includes members from all sections of the community					
The local brigade actively supports the community in other ways, not just fighting fires					
Personally, I have a good opinion of our local RFS brigade					

How busy do you think your local brigade is?

Please write the number of times per year you think your local brigade...

..attends fires and other emergencies	about ___ times per year
..holds training sessions	about ___ times per year
..holds brigade meetings	about ___ times per year

Family members as RFS volunteers

<p>Has an immediate family member ever been an RFS volunteer <u>while</u> they were living in your household? <i>Please circle</i></p>	<p>Yes / No</p>
--	------------------------

	Very Negative	Somewhat Negative	I Didn't Mind	Somewhat Positive	Very Positive	Not Applicable
If yes , what was that like for you?						
What effect has that had on your interest in volunteering?						

Your potential availability to respond to fires and emergencies

We need to get some idea of what times able-bodied people in the community might be available to respond to fires and other emergencies. We are not assuming that you are going to volunteer, but please tick any of the following that would describe your availability **IF** you did join the RFS.

Note: if you cannot volunteer with the RFS because of age, illness or disability please tick here and skip this question.

	Most incidents	Some incidents	Never
Weekends during the day			
Weekends during the night			
Weekdays during the evening			
Weekdays overnight			
Weekdays during business hours			
Weekdays when the kids are at school			
Shift worker – during working hours			
Shift worker – outside working hours			
Self employed – during business hours depending on other commitments			
Farmer – during business hours depending on farm duties (harvest etc.)			

Supposing you DID join (or rejoin) the local RFS fire brigade:

<p>About how long would it take you to get to your nearest RFS fire station <u>from home</u>? <i>If you can't get to the fire station write N/A</i></p>	<p>_____ min.</p>
<p>About how long would it take you to get to your nearest RFS fire station <u>from work</u>? <i>If you can't get to the fire station write N/A</i></p>	<p>_____ min.</p>

Further information about your potential availability:

We all live busy lives. If you can tell us a bit more about the things that would make it hard for you to attend fire calls, training and meetings, please do so here. (e.g. need to look after the children during school holidays, can't attend during shearing, can't attend during business hours etc.).

Please now skip to Section D, the white pages starting on page 10.

Section C - only for former RFS volunteers.

Please complete this section only if you are a former RFS volunteer who was a volunteer at any time since 1997. Otherwise, skip to section D (the white section) on page 10.

Roughly, for what years were you a volunteer fire fighter in NSW?
 (for example 1993-2001)

.....

What aspects of being a volunteer fire fighter did you either enjoy or dislike?

Please tick a box for each item

	Greatly Disliked	Somewhat Disliked	Didn't Mind	Somewhat Enjoyed	Really Enjoyed	Not Applicable
The amount of time involved						
Attending meetings						
Hands-on training						
Written assessments						
Assisting with community education						
Checking hydrants, tanks & fill-points						
Directing traffic at road accidents when police were available for that task						
Assisting with displays at fetes, fairs etc.						
Assisting with displays for schools and kindergartens						
Attending "out of area" calls						
Leading other fire fighters at incidents						
Attending "out of area" incidents but not doing any fire fighting						
Assisting with fund-raising for other community organisations						
Management of the brigade						
Brigade politics						
Learning new skills (e.g. weather, map-reading, driving, first aid)						
Attending brigade formal occasions (e.g. annual dinner)						
Mixing with brigade members informally (the pub, footy, at home, at barbeques or parties)						
Driving fire vehicles						
Criticism from the public						
Criticism from other agencies						

Thinking about why you left the RFS, what were the main reasons for leaving?

Please tick to show how important each reason was to you

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Not Applicable
Retired due to illness or disability				
Retired due to age				
Left after starting a family				
Moved to a new home that was too far from a fire station				
Increasing demands of work or business				
Reduced job security				
Increasing time demands of family				
Increasing time demands of the RFS				
Didn't fit in with the other members of the brigade				
Found that a few of us were doing all the work				
Other interests took over				
Concern about legal liability & being sued				
Found that the RFS is too "top heavy" with management				
Recent increases in the amount of training and assessment				
Having to get formal assessments for things I've been doing for years				
Found I wasn't cut out for it				
I simply lost interest				
The RFS spends too much money on the wrong things				
Other people in the community can't understand why we volunteer				
The RFS doesn't spend enough money on the things volunteers most need				
We've lost local control of what we purchase and when we purchase it				
I felt we weren't respected by some members of the other emergency services				
It took too much time for the few fires we have				
The increasing paperwork in recent years				
I just needed a change				

Other *Please add any other reasons that were important for you...*

Please now go to Section D, the white pages starting on page 10.

Section D - for everyone to complete.

Barriers to joining an RFS brigade

Thinking about reasons why you might **not** join (or rejoin) the RFS, how important would each of the following reasons be for you?

For each of the following possible reasons please tick a box to show how important the reason is.

	Major Reason	Minor Reason	Not Important	Not Applicable
I don't think we need a local fire brigade				
Volunteering with the RFS is a low priority for me				
I didn't realise the fire brigade was made up of volunteers				
I didn't know they needed more volunteers				
I don't know how to become a volunteer				
I wouldn't find fighting fires enjoyable				
The RFS is not sufficiently supported by the government/council so I'm not prepared to give up <i>my</i> time				
I don't want to take a job away from a paid fire-fighter				
I have poor health, poor fitness or other disabilities that prevent me from volunteering				
I'm too old to be fighting fires				
I feel I wouldn't fit in with members of the local brigade				
The RFS has become too bureaucratic				
If there's a big enough fire I'll be there to help anyway, so I don't need to join the RFS				
My first priority is to protect my own property and my neighbours/family/friends' properties. I can't do that if I'm off somewhere else with the RFS				
I'm not suited for the kinds of things fire fighters do				
I would be concerned about my safety				
The local brigade has too much internal politics				
I would find it too upsetting/distressing/frightening				
RFS volunteering takes too much time				
I believe the fire brigade should be paid, not made up of volunteers				
I can't leave my work/business or farm to attend fires				
I'm concerned about being sued by someone				
I wouldn't be able to leave my family duties to go to fires				
My employer wouldn't be happy about me attending fires				
I'm concerned about loss of income if I'm injured				
My family wouldn't be happy about me joining				
I am concerned about personal costs like petrol when I drive to training or call-outs				

Barriers to joining, continued..

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Not Applicable
Things are too tough for me financially				
I don't have any spare time after work/business/farm & family commitments				
I have spare time but it is unpredictable so I couldn't meet regular commitments				
I have spare time, I just prefer to use it doing other things				
I live too far from the fire station to respond in time				
I work too far from the fire station to respond in time				
I don't have any transport to get to the fire station				
I don't have anyone to mind the children				
Volunteering with the RFS just doesn't interest me				
I would rather help by donating to RFS				

Other reasons If you have other reasons for not joining the RFS, please add them below.

RFS volunteers fill a variety of roles. As well as front-line fire fighting, volunteers can also specialise in fields such as radio communications, assisting at fire control centres, catering and educating the community about fire safety.

For each of the following roles, please tick a box to show how interested you are.

	Not at all Interested	Not very Interested	Uncertain	Somewhat Interested	Very Interested
How interested are you in volunteering with the RFS as a fire-fighter ?					
How interested are you in volunteering with the RFS in a specialist role (communications, assisting at fire control centres, catering, community education, fire prevention, etc.) ?					

Please tick a box to show how likely you are to volunteer with the RFS.

	Very Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Don't Know	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely
How likely is it that you will volunteer to join the RFS as a fire-fighter within the next 12 months?					
How likely is it that you will volunteer with the RFS in the next 12 months in a specialist role (communications, assisting at fire control centres, catering, community education, fire prevention, etc.) ?					

What would make it easier to volunteer?

What could the RFS or the local brigade do to make it easier for you to become a volunteer?

For each of the following, please tick a box to show how helpful that would be.

	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not Helpful	Not Applicable
Provide information sessions about volunteering with RFS				
Invite me personally to volunteer				
Publicise intake dates for new volunteers				
Assist with child-care during RFS activities				
Recognise my past fire fighting knowledge instead of making me retrain under the new system				
Make it easier for friends or family members to also become involved with the RFS				
Help me get started by introducing me to other brigade members and showing me how things work around the brigade				
Help me develop skills that would be useful in other parts of my life (4WD driving, chainsaw use, leadership, computers, first aid)				
Help me get qualifications that would help my career (workplace trainer certificate, heavy vehicle licence, first aid certificate)				

Benefits of joining an RFS brigade

Thinking about reasons why you might consider joining (or rejoining) your local RFS brigade, how important would each of the following be for you?

For each of the following possible reasons, please tick a box to show how important the reason is.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Not Applicable
Volunteering with the RFS would be a chance to put something back into the community				
It would allow me to meet new people				
It would allow me to learn new skills				
I could get qualifications to help my career				
It would help me to start a career as a paid fire-fighter				
It would allow me to develop and use leadership skills				
It would allow me to make a difference at emergencies				
It would help to motivate me to keep fit				
It would help me to get involved with the community				
It's something a bit adventurous				
I would be proud to be an RFS volunteer				
If there is a genuine shortage of volunteers I would join				
I would enjoy teaching the community about fire safety				
I would find catering for fire-fighters rewarding				
Using my office skills to help with brigade administration or in fire control centres would be rewarding				
I would find fund-raising rewarding				

What is your current marital status?

- Tick one box

Never Married
 Widowed
 Divorced
 Separated but not divorced
 Married or a de facto relationship

Were you born in Australia? **Yes / No** (please circle one)

If you were born overseas, in which country were you born? _____

What year did you arrive in Australia?
 year

Do you identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? **Yes / No**
(please circle one)

What is the level of the *highest* qualification you have completed?
 For example, Year 10, HSC, Trade Certificate, Bachelor Degree, Certificate 2, Advanced Diploma. _____

What is the *main* field of study for your *highest* completed qualification? _____
 For example, plumbing, primary school teaching, building trades, beauty salon practice, engineering, accounting.

Did you do any voluntary or unpaid work in the community in the past 12 months? **Yes / No**
(please circle one)

For example, "Meals on Wheels", school committees, local councillor, working bees at the kindergarten,

If you answered "Yes", what sort of voluntary work did you do and about how many hours did you put in for the year?

Type of work	Number of hours for the year

Are there any other comments or views you would like to express about how the RFS or your local RFS brigade is doing, or about volunteering with a fire brigade?



Tear off this section and keep it for your reference!

This survey of communities served by the NSW Rural Fire Service is being conducted by the Bushfire CRC Volunteers Project team in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University. If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Project Manager, Jim McLennan:

Bushfire CRC
La Trobe University
Bundoora, Vic. 3086

Phone: (03) 9479 2420
Email: j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au
Fax: (03) 9479 1956